

Early Sources on the Qazaqs and their Khans

I will begin with an apology – I am a specialist in nineteenth-century history, and as such not very well-qualified to discuss the early history of the Qazaqs and their Khans. However, I am proud to teach the *History of Kazakhstan* here at Nazarbayev University, and as anyone who has taught or researched Qazaq history of the 15th-16th centuries knows, there is a small group of crucial primary sources which are the basis for almost everything we know about the Qazaqs and their Khans in this period. I give a few of the best-known below:

- Fazlullah ibn Ruzbahani Isfahani *Mehman-nama-yi Bukhara* (1509)
- ‘Abdullah Ibn Ali Nasrullahi Balkhi *Zubdat al-Athar* (1525 – 1533)
- Mirza Haidar Dughlat *Ta’rikh-i Rashidi* (1541 – 1546)
- Mahsud ibn Osman Kohistani *Ta’rikh-i Abu’l-Khayr Khani* (1540 – 1555)
- Hafiz-i Tanysh Al-Bukhari *Sharaf-nama-yi Shahi* (1584 – 1591)
- Muhammad Ibn Wali *Bahr al-Asrar fi Manaqib al-Akhyar* (1634)

These are all Islamicate chronicles, narrative dynastic histories, written in Persian (with the exception of the *Zubdat al-Athar*, which is in Turkic) in the 16th and 17th centuries. It is not a comprehensive list, and does not include hagiographies or documentary evidence, but these are probably the key texts historians most commonly refer to when trying to reconstruct the early history of the Qazaqs and their Khans.¹ There are three in particular from which I ask my students to read extracts in class – these are the *Mehman-nama-yi Bukhara*, the *Bahr al-Asrar* and the *Ta’rikh-i Rashidi*. It is this last which is our most detailed source on the Qazaqs, and which contains the passage which is the basis for this year’s jubilee celebration of the founding of the Qazaq Khanate. I give this below in the original Persian, and in English and Russian translation:

‘Va dar an ayam Ab’ul-Khayr Khan istila-yi tamam dar Dasht-i Qipchaq dasht, va salatin-i juchi nazhad ma’atraz mishodand. Janibeg Khan va Girai Khan az u gerikhte bejte, ke ‘ibarat az moghulistan ast, bar amadand, va Isan Bugha Khan ishan-ra tarhib-i tamam namud va taraf-i Chu va Qozi bashi-ra be u gozashta ke khud-i gharbi-yi u bakhta ast. Chun ishan anha [muraqqa] mibudand, ba’ad az vafat-i Abu’l-Khayr Khan ulus-i Uzbek bahm bar amadand, ekhtelaf-i besyar oftad, aksar pish-i Girai Khan va Jani Beg Khan amadand chunanche kasrat-i Ischan be dovist hazar kas miresid. Va esm-i Uzbek [va] Qazaq bar Ischan oftad. Ibteda-i daulat-i salatin-i Qazaq az sal-i hashtsad-o-haftad buda, va Allah al’em, ta nahsad-o-chehel in sadat-Qazaq istila’i tamam dasht.’

Mirza Haydar Dughlat *Ta’rikh-i Rashidi. A History of the Khans of Moghulistan* Persian text edited by Wheeler M. Thackston (Harvard University: Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, 1996) pp.50-51

‘At that time Abulkhair Khán exercised full power in the Dasht-i-Kipchák. He had been at war with the Sultáns of the race of Juji; while Jáni Beg Khán and Karái Khán fled before him into Moghulistán. Isán Bughá Khán received

¹ The best overview is Yuri Bregel’s article on Central Asian historiography in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/historiography-xii>

them with great honour, and delivered over to them Kuzi Báshi, which is near Chu, on the western limit of Moghulistán, where they dwelt in peace and content. On the death of Abulkhair Khán the *Ulus* of the Uzbegs fell into confusion, and constant strife arose among them. Most of them joined the party of Karái Khán and Jáni Beg Khán. They numbered about 200,000 persons, and received the name of Uzbeg-Kazák. The Kazák Sultáns began to reign in the year 870 [1465-66] (but God knows best), and they continued to enjoy absolute power in the greater part of Uzbegistán, till the year 940 [1533-34 A.D.].'

Mirza Haidar Dughlat *Ta'rikh-i Rashidi*, ed. E. Denison Ross & Trans. N. Elias as *A History of the Moghuls of Central Asia* (London: Sampson, Marston & Low, 1895) p. 82²

'В те дни Абу-л-Хайр хан целиком овладел Дашт-и Кипчаком. Он нападал на султанов-джучидов — Джанибек хан и Кирай хан бежали от него и прибыли в Моголистан. Исан Буга хан хорошо принял их и отдал им Козы Баши, которое находится на западе Моголистана, на реке Чу. Пока они спокойно пребывали там, улус узбеков после смерти Абул-Хайр хана пришел в расстройство, там возникли большие разногласия и большинство [людей] ушло к Кирай хану и Джанибек хану, так что число их достигло двухсот тысяч человек и их стали называть "узбек-казаками". Начало правления казахских султанов пошло с 870 (1465 — 1466) года, - а Аллах знает лучше -, и до 940 (1533 — 1534) года казахи имели полную власть над большей частью Узбекистана.'

А Урунбаев & Р. Джалилова (ред.) *Мирза Мухаммад Хайдар. Тарих-и Рашиди*. (Ташкент: Фан, 1996) сс.105-6

This short passage, with its date, is the reason why we are all here, and it highlights the fragility and tenuousness of our source base for early Qazaq history. Even looking at this little chunk of text and comparing translations, we begin to see problems of interpretation. Mirza Haydar qualifies his date for the beginning of Giray and Janibek's rule ('but Allah knows best'). Thackston gives the reading 'Uzbek **and** Qazaq' for the name of their people, but this not widely accepted – most historians prefer 'Uzbek-Qazaq', as did the original translator of the *Ta'rikh-i Rashidi* into English, Ney Elias. Both Elias and Jalilova and Urunbaev in their Russian translation describe Girai and Janibek as ruling over 'most of Uzbekistan' (which in Dughlat's text is used as a synonym for the steppe), while Thackston moves it to the following sentence and assumes it refers to the reign of Girai's son Burunduq.

Beyond this, there are other difficulties with using the *Ta'rikh-i Rashidi* that are not immediately apparent from the text. Like virtually all our authors, Mirza Haidar was not an eyewitness of the events he describes, but wrote some 80 years later in the mid-1540s. He was in Kashmir when he wrote the *Ta'rikh-i Rashidi*, serving the Mughal Emperor Humayun as governor of that province. He was not a steppe nomad from the *ulus* of Jochi himself, but a sedentary aristocrat from the neighbouring *ulus* of Chaghatai. There are signs of this distance from events in the text – not least his subsequent assertion that the Qazaqs disappeared altogether during the time of Tahir Khan. Above all, perhaps, Mirza Haidar

² Alternatively Thackston's translation reads as follows: 'Meanwhile Abu'l-Khayr Khan held total sway in the Qipchaq Steppe and harassed the Jochid princes. Jani-Beg Khan and Giray Khan fled from him into the Jata [Moghulistan], and Esan-Buqa Khan welcomed them, assigning them the area around the Chu and Quzi-Bashi, his western frontier with the Jata. There they were when Abu'l-Khayr Khan died and the Uzbek confederation fell to pieces amidst great squabbling. Most of [the Uzbeks] went to Giray Khan and Jani-Beg Khan, swelling their numbers to two hundred thousand. They were then given the names Uzbek [and] Qazaq, and the Qazaq sultans held sway from around 870 [1465-66] – God only knows – and lasted until 940 [1533-34].' Mirza Haydar Dughlat *Ta'rikh-i Rashidi*. A History of the Khans of Moghulistan Trans. & annotated by Wheeler M. Thackston (Harvard University: Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, 1996) pp.43-4

was not particularly interested in the Qazaqs. Thackston's edition of the *Ta'rikh-i Rashidi* in Persian is 407 pages long. Of these only about five pages are directly concerned with the Qazaqs and their Khans.

And yet this is our single most important, most detailed source for the early history of the Qazaqs – and these difficulties are not specific to the *Ta'rikh-i Rashidi*, but are found whenever we try to study the Qazaqs through the meagre source base available for this period.

This highlights the crucial importance of the painstaking work of generations of orientalists in interpreting such texts and making them available for study; from manuscript collation, to the preparation of editions and translations, to the deeper work of analysis and commentary, we owe an enormous debt to them: Elias, Ross, Barthold, Chekhovich, Bregel, Iudin, Pishchulina, Baranova, Urunbaev, Jalilova, Akimushkin, Salahetdinova, Muminov and Abusseitova – I could continue with the roll-call. The scholarship on the early history of the Qazaqs to date has been highly impressive.

However, I think there are still some important gaps in our understanding of the Qazaqs and their Khans. What all our sources have in common is that they were produced in neighbouring sedentary societies, and show little understanding either of nomadic society and culture, or nomadic forms of political organisation – we never hear the voice of the Qazaqs themselves in them. My colleague at Nazarbayev University, Thomas Welsford, has recently suggested that this has led to a fundamental misunderstanding of the Qazaq khanate, as the authors of our sources simply assumed that the Qazaqs had exactly the same forms of political authority and organisation as those they themselves were familiar with from sedentary societies.³ In fact, he has suggested, the political authority exercised by the Qazaq khans in the steppe may have been quite different – more fluid, with multiple centres of power (reflected in the double-khanship of Janibeg and Giray), and with fewer of the bloodlettings between rival groups of Chingissids that characterised neighbouring sedentary polities. I think the task for the next generation of historians studying this period is to try to understand the Qazaqs on their own terms, rather than constantly looking at them through the eyes of outsiders.

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³ Thomas Welsford 'The Disappearing Khanate' in B. Péri and F. Csirkes, (eds.) *Turko-Persian Cultural Contacts in the Eurasian Steppe: Festschrift in Honour of Professor István Vásáry* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015 – forthcoming)